

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

- 1 1. A computer-implemented method, comprising:
 - 2 autonomously, through one or more software agents, brokering matches between
 - 3 searchers and targets, said software agents being capable of finding one or more of said
 - 4 matches through chains of mutually trusted connections of said searchers and said targets;
 - 5 and
 - 6 reporting said matches according to access control instructions provided to said
 - 7 software agents by said searchers and targets concerning levels of details of personal
 - 8 information of said searchers and targets and contacts thereof which may be revealed to
 - 9 others.
- 1 2. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein brokering said matches includes
 - 2 automatically checking references of said targets through one or more reference checking
 - 3 agents.
- 1 3. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents are provided
 - 2 with one or more trusted verification reports regarding said targets as part of said brokering
 - 3 process.
- 1 4. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein in brokering said matches, said
 - 2 software agents operate on search criteria which comprise portions of descriptive profiles of
 - 3 said targets, said descriptive profiles including some or all of an individual's capabilities,
 - 4 history, values, interests, style, goals, projects, human networks, contacts, profiles of said

5 contacts, employment history, education history, organizational activities, organizations,
6 profiles of said organizations, or compensation requirements.

1 5. The computer-implemented method of claim 4 wherein said access controls vary with
2 different portions of said descriptive profiles of said targets.

1 6. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents comprise
2 client-side software agents configured to assist said searchers by prompting said searchers for
3 information regarding one or more of said searchers' goals, projects, weighted search criteria,
4 extent of desired search, search context, organization type, or profession.

1 7. The computer-implemented method of claim 6 wherein said access controls are set by said
2 targets using said client-side software agents and subsequently uploaded to one or more
3 servers.

1 8. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents comprise one
2 or more server-side broker agents, said broker agents configured to receive search
3 instructions within search queries and to use said search instructions along with said access
4 controls to find said matches.

1 9. The computer-implemented method of claim 8 wherein said broker agents are further
2 configured to report said matches to said searchers as paths to information regarding said
3 targets.

1 10. The computer-implemented method of claim 9 wherein one or more of said paths to
2 information comprises paths of relationships between said searchers and said targets.

1 11. The computer-implemented method of claim 10 wherein said relationships are chosen
2 from a list including personal contacts of said searchers who know said targets or personal
3 contacts of said searchers who have a contact who knows said targets.

1 12. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said access controls are included
2 within user profiles of said targets.

1 13. The computer-implemented method of claim 12 wherein said software agents are further
2 configured to search for said matches according to degrees of trust between contacts as
3 specified through said user profiles.

1 14. The computer-implemented method of claim 3 wherein said verification reports are
2 editable only by autonomous verification agents.

1 15. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents are further
2 configured to search for said matches by beginning with contacts of said searchers and
3 working outward to find said targets or connectors to said targets.

1 16. The computer-implemented method of claim 15 wherein said software agents are further
2 configured to also search for said matches by beginning with said targets and working
3 backwards to find connectors to said searchers.

1 17. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said connections comprise one or
2 more of contacts of said targets, contacts of said searchers, contacts of specified degree of
3 said searchers or targets, profiles of organizations of said searchers, contacts of organizations

4 of said searchers and/or said targets, organizations of said searchers, or trusted connection
5 paths between said searchers and said targets.

1 18. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents further
2 comprise profile building agents configured to prompt users to construct profiles comprising
3 said personal information.

1 19. The computer –implemented method of claim 18 wherein said profiles contain some or
2 all of an individual's capabilities, history, values, interests, style, goals, projects, human
3 networks, relationship networks, contacts, profiles of said contacts, employment history,
4 education history, organizational activities, organizations, profiles of said organizations, or
5 compensation requirements.

1 20. The computer-implemented method of claim 19 wherein said software agents are further
2 configured to prompt said users to complete uncompleted portions of said profiles in
3 response to information supplied by said users that describes objectives of said users.

1 21. The computer-implemented method of claim 20 wherein said information supplied by
2 said users includes search instructions.

1 22. The computer-implemented method of claim 20 wherein said information supplied by
2 said users includes project information of said users.

1 23. The computer-implemented method of claim 19 wherein said relationship networks are
2 automatically updated by incorporating references to portions of profiles of their contacts
3 who are also other users.

1 24. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents are further
2 configured to search for said matches according to project-related information supplied by
3 said searchers as part of a user profile.

1 25. The computer-implemented method of claim 24 wherein said project-related information
2 comprises unfilled project member positions.

1 26. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents are further
2 configured to search for said matches according to one or more of degrees of trust, level of
3 access, and types of access between contacts as specified through said user profiles of said
4 searchers and said targets.

1 27. The computer-implemented method of claim 4 wherein said profiles include knowledge
2 resources.

3 28. The computer-implemented method of claim 27 wherein said knowledge resources are
4 accessible by said software agents during said brokering.

1 29. The computer-implemented method of claim 28 wherein said knowledge resources are
2 linked to other portions of said profiles.

1 30. The computer-implemented method of claim 3 wherein said verification reports are
2 received from trusted third parties.

1 31. The computer-implemented method of claim 30 wherein said verification reports include
2 information verifying all or a portion of a user-supplied profile.

1 32 The computer-implemented method of claim 31 wherein said profiles include some or all
2 of an individual's capabilities, history, values, interests, style, goals, projects, human
3 networks, contacts, profiles of said contacts, employment history, education history,
4 organizational activities, organizations, profiles of said organizations, or compensation
5 requirements.

1 33. The computer-implemented method of claim 31 wherein said verification reports are
2 complied through interaction with referees who are polled regarding information provided in
3 said profiles.

1 34. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said access control instructions
2 comprise customized rules regarding portions of user profiles containing said personal
3 information.

1 35. The computer-implemented method of claim 34 wherein said rules are applicable to
2 unknown searchers or other requestors as well as known searchers.

1 36. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said access control instructions
2 comprise a set of default access groups that correspond to progressively higher levels of
3 security settings associated with various profile and contact information elements which
4 make up said personal information.

1 37. The computer-implemented method of claim 36 wherein users assigned to particular ones
2 of said access groups are permitted to view those portions of said personal information
3 protected by a corresponding one of said security settings or lower ones of said security
4 settings.

1 38. The computer-implemented method of claim 36 wherein said contacts of said searchers
2 and said targets are assigned to one or more of said access groups.

1 39. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said access control instructions
2 are further provided in part by an organization to which said searchers or said targets or said
3 contacts thereof belong.

1 40. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents are further
2 configured to autonomously seek progressive disclosure of said matches according to dialogs
3 with access agents of said searchers and said targets.

1 41. The computer-implemented method of claim 40 wherein during said dialogs personal
2 information of said searchers and said targets is selectively revealed according to said access
3 control instructions according to responses provided by said access control agents.

1 42. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents include a
2 relationship management section wherein users are permitted to carry out activities related to
3 contact and relationship management.

1 43. The computer-implemented method of claim 42 wherein said activities include importing
2 or manually entering contact records, adding hyperlinks to connect to, import from and
3 browse accessible parts of profiles created by said contacts, describing relationships to said
4 contacts, viewing graphical displays of information concerning said contacts, and keeping
5 notes on interactions with said contacts.

1 44. The computer-implemented method of claim 1 wherein said software agents include a
2 relationship management agent configured to analyze a user's interaction with said contacts.

1 45. The computer-implemented method of claim 45 wherein said relationship management
2 agent is further configured to automatically organize said contacts into categories.

1 46. A computer network comprising:

2 one or more clients configured with client applications, said client applications each
3 configured to permit users thereof to initiate search queries for potential targets specified by
4 profile criteria including some or all of an individual's capabilities, history, values, interests,
5 style, goals, projects, human networks, contacts, profiles of said contacts, employment
6 history, education history, organizational activities, organizations, profiles of said
7 organizations, or compensation requirements; and

8 one or more servers communicatively coupled to some or all of said clients and to one
9 or more of each other, and some or all thereof including a network broker configured to
10 autonomously search for matches between said search queries and said potential targets of
11 said search queries by comparing search criteria specified in said search queries with said
12 profile criteria describing said potential targets and reporting instances of acceptable
13 correspondence between said search criteria and said profile criteria where access controls
14 associated with said profile criteria of said potential targets permit said reporting in light of
15 access levels assigned to said search inquiries.

1 47. The computer network of claim 46 wherein said client applications are further configured
2 to permit users thereof to initiate said search queries through one or more graphical user
3 interfaces.

1 48. The computer network of claim 46 wherein said client applications are further configured
2 to permit users thereof to create and store profiles of themselves and their contacts, said
3 profiles containing some or all of an individual's capabilities, history, values, interests, style,
4 goals, projects, human networks, contacts, profiles of said contacts, employment history,
5 education history, organizational activities, organizations, profiles of said organizations, or
6 compensation requirements.

1 49. The computer network of claim 48 wherein said client applications are further configured
2 to permit users thereof to restrict access to said profiles of themselves and their contacts
3 using said access controls.

1 50. The computer network of claim 49 wherein said client applications are further configured
2 to permit users thereof to upload said profiles of themselves and their contacts to said one or
3 more servers.

1 51. The computer network of claim 50 wherein said network broker is further configured to
2 search for said matches using uploaded copies of said profiles of said users and their contacts.

1 52. The computer network of claim 46 wherein said network broker is further configured to
2 report said matches to said users as paths to information regarding said potential targets.

1 53. The computer network of claim 46 wherein said network broker is further configured to
2 receive search instructions within said search queries and to use said search instructions
3 along with said access controls to find said matches.

1 54. The computer network of claim 46 wherein said network broker is further configured to
2 search for said matches according to degrees of trust between contacts as specified through
3 said profile criteria.

1 55. The computer-implemented method of claim 54 wherein said network broker is further
2 configured to report verification information for said matches, said verification information
3 being derived using verification agents located at some or all of said servers.

4 56. The computer network of claim 55 wherein said verification information is editable only
5 by said verification agents.

1 57. The computer network of claim 46 wherein said network broker is further configured to
2 search for said matches by beginning with contacts of said users and working outward to find
3 said potential targets or connectors to said potential targets.

1 58. The computer network of claim 57 wherein said network broker is further configured to
2 also search for said matches by beginning with said potential targets and working backwards
3 to find connectors to said users.

1 59. The computer network of claim 46 wherein said network broker is further configured to
2 search for connectors between said users and said potential targets, said connectors having
3 suitable access levels to permit reporting of said matches in light of said access controls.

1 60. The computer network of claim 59 wherein said connectors comprise one or more of
2 contacts of said potential targets, contacts of said users, contacts of specified degree of said

3 users or potential targets, profiles of organizations of said users, organizations of said users,
4 or trusted connection paths between said users and said potential targets.

1 61. A set of computer-readable instructions embodied within a computer-readable medium,
2 said computer-readable instructions comprising a method of autonomously brokering
3 matches between search queries and potential targets of said search queries by comparing
4 search criteria specified in said search queries with profile criteria describing said potential
5 targets and reporting instances of acceptable correspondence between said search criteria and
6 said profile criteria provided that access controls associated with said profile criteria of said
7 potential targets permit said reporting in light of access levels assigned to said search
8 inquiries.

1 62. The computer-readable instructions of claim 61 wherein said search queries are
2 formulated using client applications and said brokering is performed using one or more
3 server applications.

1 63. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said profile criteria comprise
2 portions of descriptive profiles of said potential targets, said descriptive profiles including
3 some or all of an individual's capabilities, history, values, interests, style, goals, projects,
4 human networks, contacts, profiles of said contacts, employment history, education history,
5 organizational activities, organizations, profiles of said organizations, or compensation
6 requirements.

1 64. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said search criteria comprise one
2 or more of a desired individual's capabilities, history, values, interests, style, goals,
3 employment history, education history, or compensation requirements.

1 65. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said access controls vary with
2 different portions of said descriptive profiles of said potential targets.

1 66. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said instructions further include
2 search agents configured to prompt users for search queries through one or more graphical
3 user interfaces.

1 67. The computer-readable instructions of claim 66 wherein said search agents prompt users
2 for search queries by seeking information regarding one or more of a user's goals, projects,
3 weighted search criteria, extent of desired search, search context, organization type, or
4 profession.

1 68. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said access controls are set by
2 said client applications and subsequently uploaded to one or more of the server applications.

1 69. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said server applications are
2 configured to receive search instructions within said search queries and to use said search
3 instructions along with said access controls to find said matches.

1 70. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said server applications are
2 configured to search for said matches according to degrees of trust between contacts as
3 specified through said client applications.

1 71. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said server applications are
2 configured to report verification information for said matches.

1 72. The computer-readable instructions of claim 62 wherein said server applications are
2 configured to search for connectors between search initiators and said potential targets, said
3 connectors having suitable access levels to permit reporting of said matches in light of said
4 access controls.

1 73. The computer-readable instructions of claim 72 wherein said connectors comprise one or
2 more of contacts of said potential targets, contacts of said initiators, contacts of specified
3 degree of said initiators or potential targets, profiles of organizations of said initiators,
4 organizations of said initiators, or trusted connection paths between said initiators and said
5 potential targets.

1 74. The computer-readable instructions of claim 73 wherein said connectors are
2 automatically updated according to receipt of updated profile information regarding said
3 connectors.

1 75. The computer-readable instructions of claim 74 wherein said updated profile information
2 is stored by said server applications.